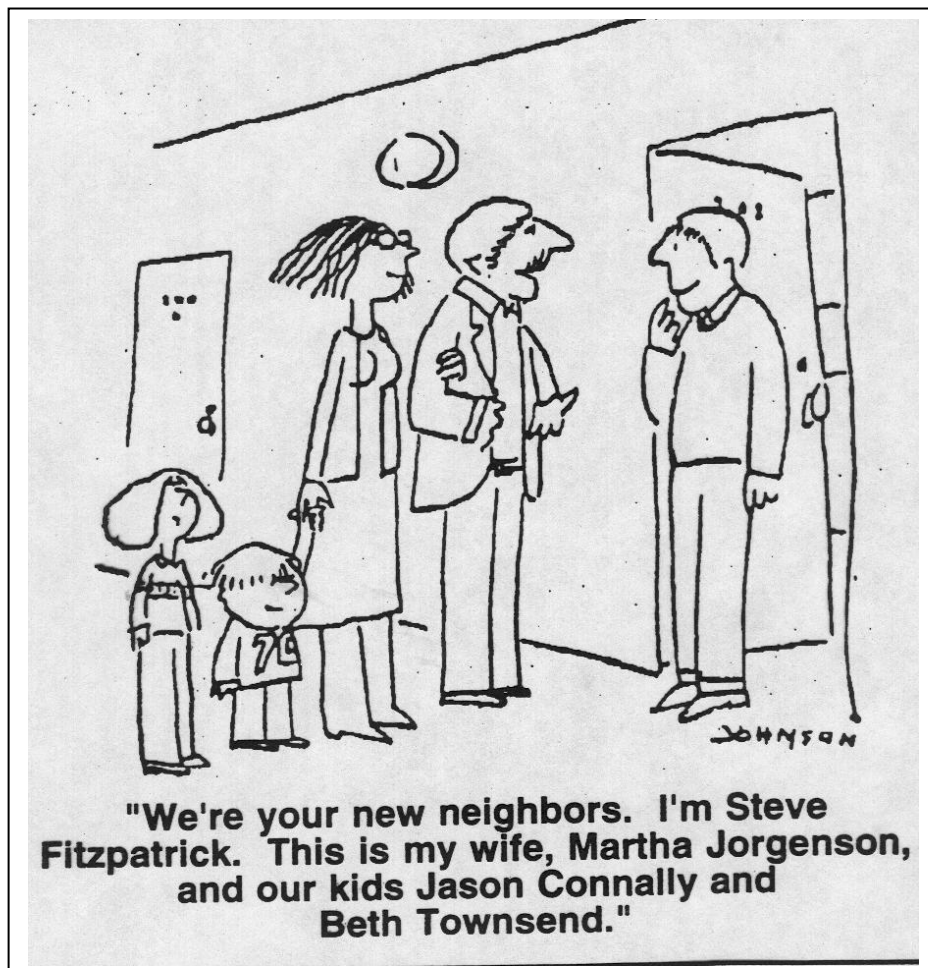# UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH STUDENTS IN STEPFAMILIES

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"We're your new neighbors. I'm Steve Fitzpatrick. This is my wife, Martha Jorgenson, and our kids Jason Connally and Beth Townsend."

STEPFAMILIES

Quick Facts

"Stepfamilies receive little formal or informal social support from non-family members and social systems. They also seldom seek or receive support from friends and extended family members – potential sources of informal support"[1]

"School policies generally do not validate stepparents' significant contributions to their stepchildren's development. Instead, schools too often convey a message of the unimportance of stepparents in school-related issues. While stepchildren may be taught to respect a stepparent at home, they learn that stepparents are not respected as parental figures by the schools. This implied message can be detrimental to children, disempowering to stepparents, and erode the already fragile stepparent-stepchild relationship."[2]

Prevalence of Remarriage
- Remarried couple households are common
  - 27% of households maintained by married couples include at least one partner who has previously been married[3]
- About ½ of marriages in the United States are remarriages[4]
  - 11% First marriage of bride, remarriage of groom; 11% First marriage of groom, remarriage of bride; 23% Remarriage of bride and groom

Prevalence of Stepfamilies
- One-quarter of current stepfamilies involve cohabiting couples[3]
- When cohabitation is taken into account about two-fifths of all women and 30% of all children are likely to spend some time in a stepfamily[1]

Pathways to Stepfamily living [3]
- One-third of children entering stepfamilies do so after birth to an unmarried mother rather than after parental marital disruption.
- Almost two-thirds enter by cohabitation rather than marriage.
- Almost one-quarter of nonmarital births occur after marital disruption, thus many children of even separated or divorced mothers enter a stepfamily without having experienced the dissolution of the previous marriage.
- For pre-schoolers, the least frequent mode of entry into stepfamilies is that of the traditional stepfamily: parental remarriage following a marital disruption.

Outcomes of Stepchildren
- On measures of "well-being", 43% of children in stepfamilies are better off than the average child in a two-parent family.[5]

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[1] Ganong, L. H., & Coleman, M. (2004). *Stepfamily relationships.* New York: Kluwer.

[2] Crosbie-Burnett, M. (1994). The interface between stepparent families and schools: Research, theory, policy, and practice. In K. Pasley & M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.), *Stepparenting: Issues in theory, research, and practice,* (pp. 199-216). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

[3] Wineberg, H., & McCarthy, J. (1998). Living Arrangements After Divorce: Cohabitation versus Remarriage. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage,* 23(1/2) 131-146.

[4] U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1999*. National Center for Health Statistics. Washington DC.

[5] Amato, P. R. (1994). The implications of research findings on children in stepfamilies. In A. Booth & J. Dunn (Eds.) *Stepfamilies: Who benefits? Who does not?* (pp. 81-87). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Recommendations for Educators and Administrators who work with Stepfamilies

Source (used with permission):
Crosbie-Burnett, M. (1994). The interface between stepparent families and schools: Research, theory, policy, and practice. In K. Pasley & M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.), *Stepparenting: Issues in theory, research, and practice,* (pp. 199-216). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Recommended Conceptualizations:
1. Change from the assumption of hostility between divorced biological coparents' households, to an assumption and encouragement of enduring cooperative coparenting by the biological parents and stepparents in those households. Even if this cooperation is not a reality for many sets of coparents and stepparents, the power of the school as a social institution in making the assumption of cooperation may promote this behavior and encourage a norm of cooperative parenting.
2. Change from thinking about the involvement of the parent and residential stepparent and the nonresidential parent and stepparent from the dichotomous categories of "real parent" versus "not a real parent," as well as "involved" versus "uninvolved" to thinking about *parent involvement* as dimensions on a continuum. Parental involvement occurs in many ways, ranging from having actual behavioral involvement with the child on a daily basis to irregularly communicating by mail. The meaning that a child gives to a relationship with a parental figure can be more important than the frequency of parent-child interactions.
3. Letting go of the ideology that "there can be only one mother and one father" and promoting a subsequent change from perceiving the stepparent as a parental replacement to *perceiving the stepparent as an additional parental figure.* Even in the situations in which there is a stepfather who is involved with his stepchild and the biological father is nonresidential, the child may still perceive the stepfather as an additional parent and not a replacement of his or her father.
4. Expansion of our narrow definition of "parent" as the biological parent or parents with whom the student lives to *significant parental figures* in the child's extended stepfamily network. Parental figures can include nonresidential biological parents, residential or nonresidential stepparents or stepsiblings, grandparents, or other relatives. Educators must recognize that a child's most important *psychological parent* or parents may not be synonymous with a residential, biological parent, and that all parental figures have the *potential* to contribute to the child's development in school. These persons are all potential sources of support on whom the school can call when helping children maximize their potential.

Recommendations for School District Administrators:
1. Workshops on family structures should be made available to all school personnel, and incentives for them to attend should be provided. The reason for sensitizing the professional staff to the variability of students' families is obvious. However, it is equally important that all school staff who interact with family members understand various family structures. For example, bus drivers often have face-to-face interactions with parental figures, while school secretaries are crucial liaisons between parental figures and the school.
2. Discourage the use of negative language like "broken home," "reconstituted family," "real mother," "natural father," and "having no father." Teachers and other school personnel are powerful models for children regarding their perceptions of the world. When children that are not from first-marriage families hear teachers and others use these terms, they receive negative, nonsupportive messages to the effect that there is something wrong with their family situations: that their families are unacceptable and abnormal. When children in first-marriage families hear adults using these terms, it encourages "I'm better than he [or she]" thinking and makes children from stepfamilies more vulnerable to peer ridicule and rejection.

3. Review local policy, practices, forms, and curricula for first-marriage families bias. Assistance from a committee of parental figures from various family structures is necessary in this endeavor. Examples of potential areas for change include: addressing correspondence from the school to "Parent(s) of: (student's name);" sending important notices home with children on days other than Fridays, when some children go directly to nonresidential parents' homes; modifying school projects that relate to family members to include the variety of family structures (e.g., making Mother's Day cards for two mothers).
4. Annually update family structure information for each student; include names, addresses and phone numbers of all significant parental figures and any court order related to the student (e.g., concerning child custody or visitation). Encourage parents to notify the school when family changes occur in order to maximize services for their children. Be particularly cognizant of custody dispute cases as a precaution against child snatching.
5. Mail report cards and important announcements to nonresidential parents with information stating that they have the right of access to their biological children's records (unless this right has been legally denied). By doing so, the school validates their parental rights and responsibilities and relates to these parents in a way that invites involvement.
6. Offer separate teacher-parent conferences for coparents and parental figures who will not attend conferences together but still wish to learn about their child's progress.
7. Maintain library materials that focus on the experiences of children in step-families. This will normalize the stepfamily within the culture and also will validate the experiences of stepchildren in the schools, helping their peers understand step-family living.
8. Sponsor support groups for parental figures in extended stepfamily networks. Schools are in an excellent position to perform this service.
9. Provide a list of books and community services for parental figures in stepfamilies to help ease the transition for themselves and their children.
10. Direct school-based professionals to be available to all parental figures. The more adults that the school empowers to help a child, the better likelihood of school success for him or her.
11. Write to textbook publishers stating that your district would like to use books that include references to stepfamilies in a normative manner. Schools are in a powerful position to request that publishers expand family images in both pictures and written text to include stepfamilies.

Recommendations for Other School-based Professionals:
1. Learn more common stepfamily issues and appropriate intervention strategies. Professionals must take into account the structural and psycho-emotional complexities of stepfamilies when serving stepchildren.
2. When working with an individual student, identify the significant parental figures in the student's family and be sensitive to the student's family experience from his or her own perspective. Most theory and concomitant training is based on first-marriage families.
3. Include significant parental figures in the assessment of the student's problem and in any intervention; solicit their support in working with the student. Help facilitate communication and cooperation between adults in different households.
4. Facilitate discussion groups for parental figures that focus on school-related issues and student-focused problem solving.
5. Periodically offer support groups for stepchildren in the schools.
6. Identify local counselors, psychologists, and therapists who have training in stepfamily issues for purposes of referral and consultation. Identify any community support services, such as support groups, for stepfamily members who are having problems.